

STATEMENT

Of

H. GERALD STARNES

6030 A1A South
St. Augustine, FL 32080
Telephone (904) 471-4652

On

HR23

Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007

House Committee on Veterans Affairs

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

My name is H. Gerald Starnes, here today to urge passage of HR23, a Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007. I am speaking for about 3,000 still living Veteran graduates of the United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, NY who have joined Mr. Ian T. Allison and the Just Compensation Committee in the endeavor to at last gain Congressional recognition for our services in helping win that forgotten great war of 1941-1945. The U. S. Merchant Marine Academy is the only one of the five federal service academies that send their Cadets into wartime combat zones. The memorial monument on the campus bears the names of 141 young men who lost their lives in combat.

All of us are very grateful for the superb education we received and are proud to be graduates of that institution of military discipline and valuable learning. There was a war on and the largest ship building program the world had even seen required trained engineering and deck officers in manning these vessels when they were delivered. Appointments were relatively easy to obtain for 17 and 18-year old males; no police record, high school diploma, in perfect health, recommendations from neighbors who had known us all our lives and our high school principal. We were sworn in as Cadet/Midshipman with the rank of Midshipman in the US Naval Reserve and received a Commission in the Naval Reserve upon graduation. Naval Science was one of our major courses and included gunnery. If there was a call to General Quarters, we had an assigned battle station to serve with the vessel's Navy Gun Crew.

Unlike our all of our armed forces, many of whom never left a desk stateside, and received the G. I. Bill for four years of college, all the veteran members of the classes of

'39 through '47 did not receive a degree at graduation as the Academy wartime curriculum did not meet the requirements for college accreditation. After graduation, we Kings Pointers and all the other Merchant Mariners of World War II were denied veterans status by every Congress for over four decades and received not a single benefit of any sort.

Until 1977 merchant seamen were not allowed to apply for veteran recognition. Following a Federal Court ruling in 1986 to recognize merchant seamen as veterans, like the others, in 1988, we received a U. S. Coast Guard discharge and notification of eligibility for limited medical attention if you were homeless or on Medicaide. To me and my fellow veteran alumni these documents were deemed worthless. I had retired from General Electric and had held a U. S. Coast Guard Chief Engineer's license since 1952 and, like my father, a World War I veteran, I wanted nothing to do with a VA hospital. My dad spent several months during and after the war recovering in Walter Reed hospital and would only go to our local VA institution on a Sunday afternoon to see a baseball game.

An engineer on watch in the engine room of a ship makes decisions on what is wrong or right with the plant's operation, based on the numbers that his instrumentation is reading out, his sense of how the equipment should sound and what his crew is telling him about their observations. However, enemy submarine torpedoes and aircraft attacks were always aimed at the engine room to stop the ship for the kill. This added other thoughts when you're on duty below the water line no matter how much coffee you drink and try to avoid them.

After the war ended, in August, 1945, President Truman urged us Merchant Mariners to stay on the ships. More casualties occurred as 54 vessels struck mines. I personally recall running down the Malacca Straits full speed through a night of thunder and lightening on a tanker with 135,000 barrels of fuel oil for the reoccupied British Naval base in Singapore. During the Japanese occupation, they had destroyed all the navigational aids such as lighthouses and buoys and had mined the strait that had supposedly been swept clear by Allied mine sweeping vessels.

The average age of the World War II Merchant Marine Veteran is now 83 or 84. Many are enfeebled, in ill health and in a pitiful situation financially, physically and mentally. An aged Kings Pointer called to thank me for my efforts in informing the Veterans on HR23. I had his name listed as graduating in a later class than his age would indicate. He probably couldn't remember what he had for breakfast, but he could remember well that he was "sunk three times in the Mediterranean and couldn't get out of there and back to the Academy to graduate with his class".

For over 60 years the Congresses of the United States have denied us recognition and benefits as war veterans. We are aware that the outcry in both legislative bodies will be "there is no money for the Merchant Mariners; it's all been allocated to other veteran organizations and government agencies". The first years benefits of HR23 would, at the very most, be only \$120,000,000 and decrease every year thereafter to zero in a few years. With all due respect to the problems of the 109th Congress, we do not understand why HR23 and S1272 could not have come to the floor of the lower and upper houses for a vote when 9,963 special interest "earmarks" totaling \$29 Billion were passed into law in 2006, according to the Wall Street Journal. At our advanced ages, this is our last

chance. We believe that the new 110th Congress can and will pass our benefit bill this year.

Thank you very much for your attention to our cause.